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# THE SCHOOL REVIEW

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## THE TEACHING OF GERMAN LITERATURE IN HIGH SCHOOLS AND ACADEMIES

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STARR WILLARD CUTTING  
The University of Chicago

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To study literature, even in an elementary fashion, presupposes, of course, the ability to read and understand the language in question. We teachers have sinned much against this axiomatic principle by premature efforts to teach German literature to pupils signally deficient in knowledge of the German language. We have robbed the learner of the time needed to prepare himself for doing what we have insisted upon his doing at the outset. The result has always been waning interest and increasing discouragement on the part of the serious student, who has felt instinctively the hopelessness of his task, and complacent pride and self-satisfaction in the shallow student, who confuses his superficial work with real mastery of the subject.

In a large and very general sense of the word, it is quite true that any and all study of a language is a simultaneous study of the national literature: this, for the simple reason that the idiomatic structure of the sentence is at once a phenomenon of language and of literature. But for the purpose of this paper we may understand by the term *literature* those forms of art that appeal to us through language as their common means of expression. These forms are, of course, unintelligible for him who is ignorant of the means of their manifestation. Until the

pupil has actually mastered the mechanism of inflection, the usual laws of word-order, the habitual case-associations and relational meanings of all common prepositions, the idiomatic shades of meaning conveyed by such particles as *denn*, *doch*, *eben*, *erst*, *einmal*, *ja*, and *wohl*, and by the modal auxiliaries and subjunctive mood, it is precious time wasted to trouble him with so-called study of German literature. For it is a careless use of an otherwise respectable term to call the blind gropings of a learner, not thus preliminarily trained, "translation of German into English." Such upsettings of one language into another are synonymous with linguistic chaos, and caricature the literary form of the original. They render impossible an appreciation of this form, and incidentally teach a fatal disregard of, and disrespect for, all linguistic tradition. It would be far better for all concerned to refrain from such attempts to study German literature directly and to study it indirectly with the help of the best available vernacular translations. Fortunately we are not confined to these embarrassing alternatives: to avoid them we need simply to teach the language conscientiously and thoroughly, focusing attention constantly upon its idiomatic structure, and to defer the study of the literature until an adequate foundation has been laid for it. This means, in my opinion, that two full years of prevailingly linguistic training should be the normal preparation for the study of German literature in the high school. And it also means that these years should be filled to the brim with a type of instruction that calls for much oral drill inside and outside the classroom. I know of no other means than this to impress indelibly upon the learner's mind the idiomatic twist of German hearthstone and market-place thought and expression. Only when prefaced by abundant oral drill of this sort are written exercises an effective aid in securing requisite accuracy of detail.

The sound maxim that recommends proceeding from the known to the unknown and from the better known to the less known should guide our choice of authors and texts. Our pupils are all more familiar with the nineteenth than with the eighteenth century. They are more at home in the second than

in the first half of the nineteenth century. This suggests the advantage of beginning with recent rather than with remote authors. Rather intensive study of comparatively recent works is the best sort of key to an adequate interpretation of thought less familiar to the learner, through remoteness of time or of range. The sequence of works studied would then be based upon an application of the general principle just mentioned to the circumstances of the particular case.

We have all been distressed at the signal failure attendant upon the use of eighteenth-century classics as an introduction of American learners to German literature. The double reason for this failure is linguistic and social: first, we have already emphasized the ridiculously scanty language equipment sometimes deemed adequate for such an experiment; some of us have listened to helpless statements of the victims of this procedure, who, in claiming credit for previous work, were not sure whether they had read anything written by Lessing or Schiller, but had the impression that they had read Goethe's *Faust*. These students have rarely done a sufficient amount of well-selected and sharply supervised work in the German of today to give them that feeling of at-home-ness in the language without which there can be no consciousness of mastery. For such students all the archaisms, all the obsolete and obsolescent words and idioms, found in the eighteenth-century classics, are in no sense different from the difficulties of current speech not yet overcome by them. Only blind groping is possible in such premises; discouragement and indifference are the immediate result, and positive dislike for the subject usually the secondary result, of a struggle against such odds. Furthermore, the works of the eighteenth century took shape under political and social conditions quite remote from those of the present moment in America. It is not easy for the American pupil mentally to bridge the wide gulf between our own social conditions and German society of the eighteenth century. This is, therefore, another valid reason for deferring the study of works that reflect these earlier social conditions and movements until a substantial beginning has been made in the study of nine-

teenth-century literature. In fact, there are but few works of the earlier period that should be included even in a four-year course of German reading.

We should not lose sight of the fact that the chief aim of all school work in German during the first three years should be to teach our pupils how to acquire throughout the range of as much of their mental activity as possible the peculiar habits of German thought and expression. Success at this point is of paramount importance; for it alone removes the philistinism of the American student with respect to the essence of the language and renders possible face-to-face communion with the foreign author. For this purpose the works read must furnish the material for a vast amount of oral and written exercises. These exercises not only test the thoroughness with which the learner has appropriated the German author's thought, but are also the most effective means for securing increasing control of the foreign idiom. Such exercises are most fruitful when undertaken in connection with texts differing but slightly from the spoken German of today. This is an additional reason for reserving until the fourth year the study of works like Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell* or *Maria Stuart* and Goethe's *Hermann und Dorothea*. A wise selection of modern authors and works yields an abundance of vocabulary, the mastery of whose discrepancies from the English vernacular affords the best conceivable vantage-ground from which to attack the difficulties of classic style.

Pupils of the high-school age are still chiefly interested in concrete thinking. They are not yet addicted to much abstract reflection about the objects of their observation and experience. They are more easily drawn to the reading of literature than to a never so cleverly constructed consideration of the development of literature. The teacher of German in the high school, mindful of this fact, will refrain from all attempts to teach the chronological, geographical, and philosophical aspects of German literary history. He will confine his attention largely to groups of authors, represented by the writers actually read and discussed in the class. He will emphasize the qualities of the works thus examined, call attention to the similarities between

them and those in the vernacular already familiar to the student, or to the unique features of the foreign products. The teacher will use as skilfully as possible whatever insight he may possess into the substance, structure, and beauty of these products, to stimulate in his pupils similar insight and appreciation. But he will subordinate all efforts of this kind to the main purpose of allowing the foreign author to make his own appeal to the reader.

By such retrenchment of material and concentration of attention the pupil receives a far better preparation for subsequent work in the history of German literature than could be secured in any other way. For first-hand acquaintance with well-chosen representative writers is the surest means of acquiring a relish for further study in the same direction. Teachers are often tempted to substitute for direct study of language and literature, like that here recommended, talk about the facts of language and literature. This is especially true if they rely chiefly upon the pupil's vernacular as classroom means of communication. The result, in the case of the student thus taught, is great vernacular glibness about topics but dimly understood and, in some cases, the conceit of half-knowledge or of absolute ignorance. The earnest teacher will draw from this his own inference.

The choice of individual writers within the range of nineteenth-century prose is of great importance. It should be guided by such considerations as the age, previous reading, and, within reasonable limits, the taste of the pupils. Such considerations should weigh most heavily in the initial steps of the work. They help to increase the interest of the learner in a subject with which he is essentially unfamiliar. Their importance diminishes rapidly as soon as the study is fairly under way and the pupil has become somewhat accustomed to the foreign atmosphere.

Similar to, although not identical with, the importance of such considerations is a justifiable regard for the sex of the learner. Even in America, the land of equal opportunity, boys and girls of high-school age are not appealed to equally by the same lines of literature. Of course, there is no excuse for reading with boys or girls tales colored by mawkish sentiment or

romantic sentimentality. There are plenty of wholesome stories, entirely free from this objectionable feature. But within this general range there are books whose subject and treatment are especially attractive to boys, who, a little behind their sisters in mental development, still delight chiefly in descriptions of practical and successful activity. While their sisters often show a liking for tales of knights and ladies and deeds of chivalry, the boys prefer stories of everyday life, involving the efforts of modern men to enlist the forces of nature in the service of the race or to take an active part in the struggles, defeats, and triumphs of modern society. This should be kept in mind in selecting the German books to be read in the high-school course.

It is surely not a matter of indifference for the American teacher to ascertain what in the eyes of German educators are some of the best lines of literature for the present-day youth of Germany, as one means, among several, of determining what is suitable for our own boys and girls. A very useful book of reference, containing representative opinions of German school men concerning this important subject, is entitled *Zur Jugendschriftenfrage* (Leipzig, 1903). It is a report of the *Vereinigte deutsche Prüfungsausschüsse für Jugendschriften*, and contains among other things brief evaluations of about two hundred and thirty books.<sup>1</sup>

We are, in my opinion, in danger of selecting too difficult rather than too easy texts. Nothing is more discouraging for the learner than the use of texts so full of technical difficulties as to preclude all real mastery even for those willing to bring to bear upon them a large amount of hard work. No blindness to the difficulties involved and no foolish pride in conducting a so-called "advanced course" should be permitted to stand in the way of a suitable selection of reading-matter. While it is desirable to select material that will appeal strongly to the interest of the learner, this purpose may easily be defeated if the vocabulary, syntax, and style are beyond his capacity. It is equally fatal to employ works the maturity of whose thought makes

<sup>1</sup> *Der literarische Ratgeber of Der Kunstwart*, edited by F. Avenarius (Dresden and Munich, 1887+) is an excellent guide to the best products of recent and current German literature.

unreasonable demands upon the class. In this connection I have in mind such works as Lessing's *Nathan der Weise*, Schiller's *Jungfrau von Orleans*, and Goethe's *Iphigenie* and *Tasso*. In saying this we should recall, however, the danger of the opposite extreme, that of trite simplicity. This consideration would discourage the excessive use of that type of fairy tale which appeals primarily to the childish taste of pupils below the high-school age; yet we all know that both English and German abound in genuine child-tales that are not below the level of even the maturest minds.

For the sake of variety the teacher should include in his selection passages of description, narration, and conversation. Because of the close touch of the short play with the language of everyday life, and for the sake of enlisting the natural dramatic instinct of youth in the task in hand, it is distinctly advisable to include at least one bright modern play in the high-school German course. Under favorable circumstances such a play can be utilized in a variety of ways, including informal classroom dialogue and a more formal presentation before the whole school.

The average high-school pupil cares little—far too little—for English poetry. He can usually become interested in the German lyric, if only an occasional poem is included in the reading, especially if due regard is paid to the concreteness and singability of the poems chosen. The reading of an occasional lyric poem should, however, be deferred until the linguistic equipment of the learner is sufficient to enable him to read, understand, and enjoy the song without translation. For lyric poems are inevitably murdered by the pupil's translation and become, instead of joyous song birds, mute and sorry-looking museum-specimens with glass eyes.

In place of the prevailing American use of prose fiction it seems to me that we should do well to devote more time and attention to the reading of comparatively easy versions of German history. Attempts in this direction have in the past frequently failed to yield the good results hoped for, because of the stylistic difficulties presented by the texts chosen for the



experiment. Much better for the purpose of interesting and informing our American youth concerning the salient features of Germany's past are books like *Erzählungen aus der deutschen Geschichte für Schule und Haus*, by Josepha Schrakamp, published by Holt & Co., in 1888, and the *Deutsches Reformlesebuch*, published by D. L. Savory through the Oxford University Press (1910). The inclusion of considerable historical reading in the high-school German course is justified by a due regard for the prevailing craving of American children for fact in place of fancy and by the unique chance afforded by such reading for giving our pupils some conception of the social and political soil out of which modern Germany has sprung.

To sum up in a word the points I have attempted to emphasize in the foregoing, I recommend focusing attention upon nineteenth-century prose; a sparing use of eighteenth-century classics late in the course; adjusting the choice of literature to the age, maturity, and sex of the learner; including in the later stages of the work a few of the most musical of German lyrics, with a bright modern play or two, and a larger proportion of easy historical reading matter than is usually read in our high-school course; and, above all, I recommend avoiding much vernacular talk about German literature, and teaching the subject directly through contact with carefully chosen German authors.